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**Promoting Workforce Effectiveness and Life Quality:  
Early Evidence from the  
*Cornell Couples and Careers Study***

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## Promoting Workforce Effectiveness and Life Quality: Early Evidence from the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study*

### THE ISSUE

Four sets of forces have converged to create a crisis affecting both workforce effectiveness and life quality in the United States. First is the **lag** between workplace policies and practices and contemporary labor force realities. Growing numbers of workers simultaneously confront workplace and domestic responsibilities. Along with an aging workforce, the care of ailing or infirm relatives has become yet another work/life dilemma. And working couples must consider the demands of both spouses' jobs.

Second is the **changing economy**. Advances in information technology along with globalization, organizational restructuring, and work redesign are transforming the traditional contract between workers and employers; the boundaries between work and home are increasingly blurred. Employer/employee commitments are diminishing. Seniority is no longer a guarantee of job security. And workers now express less loyalty to their organizations.

Third, **changing family structures** are making families increasingly vulnerable. Most workers feel stressed and squeezed, barely fulfilling their multiple obligations. Few workers (male or female) have family members at home to manage the non-work aspects of their lives and to facilitate their success either at home or at work (Moen 1992; Moen and Yu 1999a, b). More than half of all workers are married to an employed spouse and over a fourth are either divorced or have never married. Households rarely have the support of a homemaker (paid or unpaid). Yet work remains structured in keeping with the traditional breadwinner model, as if employees were without family responsibilities or other non-work personal involvements. Moreover, schools, medical services, and most community activities continue to be organized with reference to the homemaker model, and domestic life remains principally the province of women.

Fourth, most **"solutions" are stop-gap**, short-term band-aids, frequently addressing the time squeeze and overloads of workers as "simply" a woman's issue or a childcare problem. Many workers try to solve the dilemmas of managing work and personal obligations on an individual basis, by delaying childbearing and/or having fewer children, or through the "juggling" of roles and resources. Some businesses adopt best-practice "family-friendly" or "life-friendly" policies that are "on the books" but not always encouraged or used. Others try to ignore the problem altogether. The federal government considers tax credits for childcare or eldercare, but not (1) how outmoded regulations constrain work-hour flexibility, or (2) the dearth of extended leave, childcare, after-school care, or eldercare options. Work/life issues are seldom found on state or municipal governments' radar screens.

### THE CHALLENGE

The fact is governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, communities, and workers themselves typically suffer from **tunnel vision**, seeing only a small part of the problem and offering up only postage-stamp-sized solutions. During these times of major social upheaval, when old rules and routines no longer apply, individual households may adopt various forms of adaptation (Moen and Wethington 1992). Eventually, new blueprints for living become part of the institutional landscape. In this process there is invariably a period of lag (Riley and Riley 1994) during which old customs and practices persist in the face of changing realities.

Contemporary workers confront precisely such a lag in the interface between their work and family roles. This paper draws on data from the *Cornell Couples and Careers Survey* to describe the circumstances of

workers in two-earner families who face the challenge of **three jobs**—two at work and one at home—in a world still largely predicated on the breadwinner/homemaker template.

At the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, we focus on **work-related** lines of adaptation. Our goal is to model the conditions under which working couples are best able to **effectively manage** two paid jobs along with their job at home. One strategy is for couples to assign priority to one spouse's job over that of the other spouse's (Becker and Moen 1999). Couples may also accommodate through the number of hours that each spouse works, with one working long hours while the other cuts back. Still another strategy for managing the intersecting roles of two-earner families is for one spouse to take a job that offers greater flexibility. The strategies adopted may well vary at different life course stages, and depend also on available options at work.

## THE EVIDENCE

### THE CORNELL COUPLES AND CAREERS STUDY

In 1998 we interviewed 913 employees from seven participating organizations in upstate New York, along with 813 spouses/partners. All are dual-earner couples; typically at least one spouse is either a professional or a manager. We selected the seven organizations because they provide a variety of workplace cultures and practices, representing four key industry sectors in upstate New York: manufacturing, health care, higher education, and utility.

Couples often use joint strategies – such as having only one member in a demanding career – in order to help balance their work and family lives. But these strategies may differ across generations of workers or by life stage.

Year of birth not only captures biological age and historical circumstances, but serves as an indicator of work experience, maturity, and career status. Our sample includes four broad **age-cohorts**: the *pre-baby boomers* (those born 1923 through 1945, ages 53 to 75 at the time of the interview); the *leading edge of baby boomers* (those born 1946 through 1956, ages 42 to 52); the *trailing edge of baby boomers* (those born 1957 through 1964, ages 34 to 41); and the *young post-baby boom Generation X* (those born 1965 through 1975, ages 23 to 33).

We also divide our sample into five major **life stages**: *younger non-parents* (at least one member of the couple is younger than age 50 and no children are in the home); *launching* (those with pre-school children in the home); *establishment* (with school-aged children in the home); *adult children* (adult children in the home); and *empty nest* (those whose grown children have left home and those couples in which both are 50 or older and have no children).

### Actual Work Hours

Our research at the Cornell Careers Institute has highlighted the importance of **regular work hours** (as opposed to long hours on the job) for general life quality (low strain and low work/family conflict) and for feeling successful in balancing work and family roles (Moen and Yu 1999a, b).

Looking at the workers and their (employed) spouses, we find that couples in which both are **managers** have the longest combined work weeks (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

Men and women in our sample of dual-earner couples work remarkably similar (and relatively long) hours when they don't have children in the home. The work-hour gap between men and women averages nearly

nine hours per week when minor children are in the home (see Figure 2). Note that men's hours are relatively stable across life stages.

[Figure 2 about here]

### ***Ideal Work Hours***

Both the workers we interviewed and their spouses overwhelmingly report that they would like to work less! On average, men and women want to work at least **12 hours less per week** than they currently do, with women preferring to work fewer hours than men (nearly 8 hours fewer per week). Ideal work hours follow a life-stage pattern very similar to actual work hours, but typically the difference between men's and women's ideals is greater than the difference between their actual work hours (see Figure 3). **Women with preschoolers would like to work the fewest hours** per week, while men's ideal work hours are fairly consistent regardless of their life stage.

[Figure 3 about here]

### ***Supervisor Support***

Our earlier research shows that having a **supportive supervisor** contributes to life quality, loyalty, and the coordination of work and family role obligations (Moen and Yu 1999a; Roehling, Roehling and Moen 1999). In our survey workers in all four industry sectors, in all life stages, and in all generations report similar levels of supervisor support.

But supervisor support varies by gender within occupational groups. Specifically, women in professional occupations report significantly more supervisor support than men in professional occupations (see Figure 4). In fact, **women professionals** report the greatest amount of supervisor support overall, and men professionals report the least. It is possible that professional women seek out supportive work environments more than do professional men because they place more value on this support.

[Figure 4 about here]

### ***Control over Work Hours and Scheduling***

We also asked respondents how much control they have over such things as when and where they work, when they take time off work, and whether they can tend to personal matters while at work. We found significant differences by gender, industry sector, and life stage. Among those employed at the participating organizations, health care workers in our sample report having the least control over their work time, while those in manufacturing and higher education report the most control. In both our health care and higher education samples, men report significantly more control than women.

[Figure 5 about here]

Among all study participants (both employees and their spouses), we see differences by gender and life stage. **Men report greater control than women at every life stage**; women with school-aged and older children in the home report less control than women at other stages (see Figure 6).

[Figure 6 about here]

### ***Job Security***

Given our global, competitive economy with its climate of restructuring, we expected to find high levels of job insecurity among workers in two-earner households. However, on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 equals the highest possible job security, the people we interviewed from the seven participating organizations rate themselves on average as having relatively high job security (average score on this scale = 73). But perceived job security varies depending on where the respondents in our sample work; employees in the

**service sector** (health and higher education) tend to feel more secure about their jobs than do those in the manufacturing or utility sectors (see Figure 7).

[Figure 7 about here]

Job security is higher among **women** than among men, and higher among post-baby boomers (**Generation X**) than other older age-cohorts. Women who were born before the baby boom generation and both men and women in the post-boom Generation X report similarly high levels of job security (approximately 84 out of 100).

[Figure 8 about here]

### ***Workload***

Many workers complain of feeling overworked. We measured respondents' workload according to how much they believe that: (1) their job requires working very fast, (2) it requires working very hard, and (3) they are asked to do excessive amounts of work. Among employees in our sample, **women** in every sector report higher workload than do men. Overall, employees in higher education report significantly lower levels of workload than those in other sectors.

[Figure 9 about here]

**Managers** report high workload, and when both spouses are managers, women report the highest levels of workload (see Figure 10).

[Figure 10 about here]

### ***Leaving within the Next Four Years***

When workers in two-earner couples can't resolve their schedules or other constraints, one or both spouses may change jobs. We asked those in our sample whether they expect to do so within the coming four years. Age is significantly related to intention to leave one's current employer. Figure 11 shows that the youngest and the oldest age-cohorts of workers in this study are the most likely to plan to leave; presumably, the youngest plan to change employers and many of the oldest plan to retire.

[Figure 11 about here]

The retention of valued employees is of obvious importance to most employers. Employee turnover is costly, and many fields are experiencing a shortage of qualified professionals, making it difficult to fill positions that have been vacated. There are several aspects of the job that are related to employee retention, which we discuss in the section on "what works at work."

### ***Outsourcing Services***

One strategy that working couples use to manage the multiple demands of their lives is to **outsource** whatever can be done by others at an affordable cost. The three most popular items to hire out (besides childcare) are housecleaning (25%), yard work (24%), and accounting/tax preparation (18%). Hiring out housecleaning varies by couples' occupational status. Couples in which both are managers are most likely to hire out housecleaning, while couples in which neither is a manager are the least likely to hire it out (see Figure 12).

[Figure 12 about here]

### ***Information Technologies***

A dramatic component of contemporary work life is the technological revolution reshaping both work and work/home connectedness. The use of information technologies both on and off the job varies by the sector in which the people we interviewed work. Information technology is increasingly a way of staying in touch

with family members. Workers in higher education are the most apt to use e-mail to keep in contact with their families, and workers in the utility industry are the most likely to use pagers and/or cellular phones to keep in touch with family members (see Figures 13 and 14). Health care workers are least likely to use these forms of connecting with their families.

[Figures 13 and 14 about here]

There may well be some spillover in the use of information technologies for work purposes to the use of them to stay connected outside of work. For example, the men and women we interviewed in the **utility industry** are also the most frequent users of pagers and/or cellular phones as a means of keeping in touch with work while at home. And **managers** are the most likely to use pagers and/or cellular phones for this purpose (42% do).

This use of new technologies to remain connected to work while at home and vice versa is another potential strategy to manage work and family. There are no gender differences in the use of these technologies to keep in touch with home while at work, but there are significant gender differences in the use of these technologies to keep in touch with work from home. **Men** are more apt than women to use a pager or cellular phone (41% compared to 29%) and e-mail (47% compared to 38%) to remain connected to their work while at home.

There are life stage differences as well. Specifically, **parents with children at home** are more apt to use a pager or cellular phone to remain connected to their families while at work, compared to non-parents or those whose children are grown. By contrast, **non-parents** tend to use e-mail to keep in touch with their family members more than parents currently raising children. And younger workers are more likely to use a pager or cellular phone at work than are older workers (see Figure 15).

[Figure 15 about here]

### ***Juggling Two Careers***

When both spouses are in the workforce, couples confront the reality of two jobs plus the “job” of running a household and, frequently, raising a family. One way couples manage the role conflicts and overloads that accompany this lifestyle is to assign priority to one spouse’s job and/or trade off between spouses’ jobs at different points in time. Typically, it is **wives who scale back** – in their work hours, but also in their investment in their career development. Some of the people we interviewed described this as having a “job” rather than a “career” (see also study by Becker and Moen 1999). In our sample we find that only 15 percent of men say their spouses’ jobs have greater priority than their own, compared to 50 percent of the women. As Figure 16 shows, men put more priority on their own career than do women, regardless of their life stage.

[Figure 16 about here]

## **WHAT “WORKS” AT WORK?**

A key goal of the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study* is to understand what aspects of the workplace help employees in dual-earner couples manage both at work and in their daily lives. Toward that end, we have identified several workplace variables that are related to workforce effectiveness and life quality, such as employee retention, positive spillover, personal growth and development, and a sense of mastery.

### ***Employee Retention***

One “strategy” for managing work/family obligations is to leave one job for another, presumably to a more “family friendly” one. Approximately 70 percent of the respondents in our study plan to remain with their present employer until retirement. Twenty percent intend to leave their employer within the next four years but have no immediate plans to do so, and only four percent are seriously contemplating leaving their

employer in the foreseeable future. Younger workers are more likely to contemplate changing employers, which accounts for the slightly higher rates of intended turnover among employees in our study in the health care and utility industries.

Four workplace factors predict whether or not employees plan to remain with their current employers: **workload, control over scheduling, working a standard schedule, flextime, and telecommuting.**

Recall that we asked respondents to describe their workload in terms of whether or not their jobs require them to work very hard, very fast, and to perform an excessive amount of work. We find that men – but not women – with a low to moderate **workload** are more likely to plan to remain with their employers until retirement compared to those with a high workload (see Figure 17).

[Figure 17 about here]

We also asked respondents how much control they have over their work schedule (ability to determine when one starts and ends work, the number of hours one works, where one works, the amount of work taken home, when to take time off work, and the ability to receive personal calls and e-mails). Men with higher levels of **control** over their work hours and scheduling are more likely than those without such control to plan on staying with their employer until retirement (see Figure 17). **Thus, control over hours and scheduling as well as workload predict long term stability for men** (measured as planning to stay until retirement).

Parental status has an impact on the relationship between workplace characteristics and intention to turnover (see Figure 18):

- Among women with children in our sample, those who work a **standard schedule** (9-to-5, non-shift work) are less likely to plan to search for new employment within the next four years than are the 13 percent who work on other schedules.
- Men and women with children who have **flex-time** (that is, have the freedom to alter when they begin and end their work day) are more likely to plan on staying with their employer for at least four years. (Flex-time is not related to intention to turnover among men and women without children.) The availability of flex-time is a specific example of control over one's schedule.
- Men with children at home who **telecommute/work at home** for some portion of their work week are more likely to plan on staying with their employers for at least four more years than men at this life stage who do not telecommute.

[Figure 18 about here]

### **Growth, Spillover, and Mastery**

While employers may be concerned about retention, their workers care about the **good life**. In the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study* there are three major aspects of the workplace that are related to employee quality of life such as spillover from home to work (and vice versa), a sense of mastery, depressed mood, and/or personal growth and development: **supervisor support, control, and workload.**

#### **Supervisor support**

On average, workers that we surveyed see their supervisors as somewhat supportive. Among the women respondents in our study, supervisor support is related to several quality-of-life outcomes (see Figure 19). Specifically, among women, having a supportive supervisor is related to:

- higher reported levels of **personal growth and development**;
- fewer instances of **negative spillover** from work to home;
- greater incidence of **positive spillover** from work to home;
- greater incidence of **positive spillover** from home to work.

[Figure 19 about here]

## Control over Work Hours and Scheduling

Employees who feel that they are able to control their work hours and work schedules are generally better off than employees who feel that they have little control over their hours of work. We find significant differences between sectors in the amount of control employees exercise over their work hours. (Recall that we measured control by asking respondents in our survey about things such as the ability to schedule when and where one works).

We find (see Figures 20 and 21) that control over one's work hours and work schedule is also related to:

- greater feelings of **personal mastery**;
- higher levels of **personal growth**;
- higher levels of **positive work-to-home spillover**;
- lower levels of **negative work-to-home spillover** among men; and
- greater feelings of **success at work** among men.

[Figures 20 and 21 about here]

## Workload

Having a demanding job may be stressful, but it can also be related to job fulfillment and achievement. Thus, having a heavy workload has mixed effects. Those who have high workloads report higher levels of efficacy or **personal mastery** (as measured by questions such as "I can do just about anything that I really set my mind to" and "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me"), but these feelings of mastery come at a cost to health and family (see Figure 22). Specifically, those who report high levels of workload on their jobs also tend to report:

- higher ratings of **personal growth and development**;
- higher rates of **negative spillover** from work to home;
- higher rates of **depressive mood**; and

[Figure 22 about here]

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Contemporary workers and employers are traversing **uncharted terrain**. They are experiencing the still-changing composition of the workforce, a competitive shifting economy, and variable family structures, but operating with models of work, family, and community still predicated on a male as breadwinner/wife as homemaker model.

This overview of findings from the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study* leads to a number of observations. First, **existing arrangements are far from ideal arrangements**. Couples are managing as best they can, given the existing culture and organization of work and of career paths; but **significant numbers of workers would rather work less**. Time has become the new scarcity for American families. Both workers with young children and older workers tend to want fewer hours on the job. A range of work-hour options and flexibilities – without long-term penalties in terms of income or advancement – would equip workers to fashion – and refashion – their own work/life solutions as their needs and preferences change over the life course.

Second, there may well be important **ecological niches** (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1995) that are especially conducive (or detrimental) to the life quality and effectiveness of workers. Our evidence suggests that those in **demanding jobs are especially vulnerable**. Those with a **supportive supervisor** experience far better



life quality. Those who can **control the time and timing** of work feel more successful at work. Yet these are not factors that are conspicuous on either private or public action agendas.

Third, the work/life dilemma is **not a simple problem with a single or simple solution**. Multiple factors are associated with more or less effectiveness and life quality (at work and at home) of workers in dual-earner families. The very heterogeneity of the work and family environments of contemporary workers suggests the need for diverse and alternative time options and greater flexibility. These are not “women’s” issues but **workforce** issues that affect productivity, competitiveness, and profitability, and issues related to **stressful environments** for families that affect life chances and life quality of both children and adults.

Finally, our findings underscore the observation that workers are **constrained by antiquated structural patterns, cultural norms, and cognitive frames** about work, family, and gender (Riley and Riley 1994). For example, most workers can’t “choose” whether or not to work at home, or to have a supportive supervisor. Neither can they “choose” to work part time on a job that has a fixed upward career trajectory, or to move in and out of reduced work-hour schedules as family needs change, or to refuse to put in long hours on the job. Both opportunities and costs come **prepackaged** in ways that force choices of sets of arrangements (see also Clarkberg and Moen 1999), in packages designed for a workforce without childcare or eldercare responsibilities and without the constraints of spouses’ jobs. The redesign of work and of community infrastructures must confront these new workforce and family realities.

We are witnessing today the unfolding of new cultural prototypes of family, community, work, and career. What is required are public/private partnerships that acknowledge (1) the reality of the new workforce, (2) the changing economic climate, (3) the growing vulnerability of working families, and (4) the insufficiency of minor changes that fail to significantly alter the **time and timing of work**. Identifying the circumstances at work that “work” for contemporary two-earner couples and single-parent families at all life stages can form a basis for action in designing occupational careers, family strategies, and the life course that promote both workforce effectiveness *and* life quality in the next century.

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## Appendix: Technical Notes

This report is based on information gathered during the summer and fall of 1998 from 1726 people in upstate New York (the *Cornell Couples and Careers Study*). Interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, were conducted via telephone by the Computer-Assisted Survey Team (CAST) at Cornell University.

Potential participants were identified through seven large organizations from four key industry sectors in upstate New York: manufacturing, health care, higher education, and utility. Each corporation agreed to send a letter describing the study to a sample of its workforce; only persons who had received such a letter and expressed their interest in participating were contacted by the survey team. A total of 913 current and former employees of these seven organizations completed the interview. (Because we do not know exactly how many letters were sent and how many people failed to return a card because they believed they were ineligible, we cannot accurately calculate a response rate.)

In addition, the spouses and live-in partners of all respondents were invited to participate; a total of 813 completed interviews. All 1726 respondents were members of a dual-earner couple and, in most cases, at least one member of each couple was employed as a professional or a manager. Our sample is primarily white due to the demographics of the region, and it consists primarily of professionals and managers because we especially targeted exempt (salaried) employees.

### Data Analysis

For all analyses presenting information on individuals (as opposed to couples), each person's responses were treated as independent of his or her spouse or partner. In subsequent published papers, analyses will take into account the interdependence of spousal responses. All analyses, primarily cross tabulations and analyses of variance, were conducted using SPSS statistical software.

For analyses based on sector, we include all interviewees who were employed by one of the seven participating organizations at the time of the interview. Thus, 45 individuals who were identified through one of the seven participating employers but who terminated their employment prior to the interview were not included in sector-based analyses (N=868). Any spouse or partner who worked for one of the participating organizations at the time of interview was included in analyses based on sector (N=171). Thus, a total of 1039 respondents were employed at one of the participating organizations at the time of the interview; only this group is included in sector-based analyses presented in the body of the report.

For all couple-based analyses (e.g., couple occupational status), we included only the 808 couples for whom we have interview data from both spouses. For those couple-based analyses that include gender as a factor, data from fifteen same-sex couples was excluded.

For all other analyses (e.g., by gender, occupation, life stage, and cohort), the entire sample of 1726 employees was included. Readers may note that certain analyses reflect only a small fraction (approximately one-third) of the participants; the reason for this is that some portions of the interview (e.g., questions about supervisor support) were randomly administered (as modules) to only one third of the total sample. This allowed us to collect data on a greater variety of issues, but it substantially reduced the total number of responses to certain questions.